



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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David Klinger (202) 343-5634
Inez Connor (617) 965-5100 ext.206

VANDALS DAMAGE ENDANGERED VIRGINIA TREES

Secretary William Clark today announced the full support of the Department of the Interior in a cooperative State and Federal investigation of the destruction of endangered Virginia round-leaf birch tree seedlings by vandals.

Vandals dug up and removed, uprooted, or cut off at ground level all but 5 of 30 healthy, 2-year-old seedlings in Sugar Grove, Virginia, on the property of a landowner who has been cooperating with biologists in the protection and recovery program for the endangered trees. The damage was discovered May 17 during routine monitoring on the site in southwest Virginia by biologists.

"The loss of these young seedlings is a serious blow to the recovery of the wild round-leaf birch in Virginia," Clark said. "This kind of senseless vandalism is very disheartening. The Department of the Interior will cooperate fully with the Commonwealth of Virginia in the effort to find the people responsible for the vandalism."

The "taking" of endangered or threatened plants is prohibited on Federal lands by the U.S. Endangered Species Act. In addition, the Virginia Endangered Plant and Insect Species Act prohibits the taking of all endangered and threatened native species in the wild without a permit. If the trees were taken across State lines or involved in interstate commerce, a violation of the Endangered Species Act or the Federal Lacey Act could also be involved. Federal officials are therefore working closely in the investigation with Virginia officials and private conservation organizations.

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A reward of \$500 is being offered by Defenders of Wildlife for information leading to the arrest and conviction of those responsible for the vandalism. Anyone having information should contact H. S. Miller, Jr., at the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services in Roanoke at 703-362-1606 or the Senior Resident Agent, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Richmond at 804-771-2481.

The Virginia round-leaf birch was the first tree placed on the U.S. Endangered Species List. The tree had been regarded as probably extinct since 1914 until it was rediscovered in 1975 in Smyth County, Virginia. Since its rediscovery, the single remaining population of trees had gradually declined from 40 to only 12 trees in 1984. In efforts to halt the decline and encourage natural regeneration of the birch, suitable areas on public and private land were cleared of competing trees and shrubs. The work proved successful, as evidenced by the healthy seedlings that had become well established. Other recovery efforts were started this spring, but the seedlings from the only remaining wild population offered the greatest hope for the future.

-- FWS-29 --

Editors: A limited number of color slides of the Virginia round-leaf birch are available on loan from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Office of Audio-Visual, 202-343-8770.